

NORTH FORK CLEARWATER BASIN

Component of the

COMPREHENSIVE STATE WATER PLAN

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Idaho Water Resource Board prepared this component of the Comprehensive State Water Plan for the North Fork Clearwater River Basin. The purpose of this plan is to provide guidance for the development, management, and protection of water and related resources in the North Fork Clearwater River Basin in compliance with provisions of the Idaho State Constitution and Idaho State Code. This document describes and evaluates the water resources and related economic, cultural, and natural resources of the basin. It recognizes past actions, addresses present issues and opportunities, and seeks to ensure that uses of the water will complement state goals of achieving a high quality of life in Idaho.

The North Fork Clearwater River Basin, from its headwaters in the Bitterroot Mountains on the Idaho-Montana border to its western boundary at the confluence with the main Clearwater River below Orofino, encompasses 1,575,445 acres, or approximately 2462 square miles. The basin includes a large portion of Clearwater County and smaller portions of Shoshone County to the north, Latah County to the west, and Idaho County to the south. Above Dworshak Reservoir, the basin is predominantly public land managed by the U.S. Forest Service (90%), with private property making up the remainder. The lower portion is a fairly even mix of private, federally managed, and state owned land.

Timber is the predominant land use and industry in the basin; recreation is a major use and a growing industry. Elk River is the only incorporated town in the basin, with a population of 149 in 1992 (Fig. 1). Orofino, the largest

town in the immediate vicinity with a population of 2868 (1990), is just outside the basin.

Water quality throughout the basin is generally considered excellent, but local residents are concerned about the potential for degradation. Certain beneficial uses, such as coldwater biota and primary contact recreation, are not fully supported on all or portions of Dworshak Reservoir, North Fork Clearwater River, Long Meadow, Elk, Cranberry, Swamp, Beaver, Skull, Quartz, Meadow, and Vanderbilt Gulch creeks. Logging activities in certain watersheds, such as Elk Creek, frequently degrade water quality, primarily by excessive erosion and silt deposition.

The amount and schedule of releases from Dworshak Reservoir have become a major concern in the basin due to drought and the drawdown of the reservoir for salmon flushes. Currently, water uses in the basin are largely nonconsumptive (e.g., flow augmentation for fish, power generation, flood control, and recreation), so virtually all the average annual runoff remains in the stream. Originally, power generation at Dworshak (3.4 million AF/annum) constituted the largest use of water. Releases for flow augmentation now exceed releases based on power demand. Water claims for fish and wildlife and channel maintenance, filed by the federal government, Nez Perce, and Shoshone-Bannock Tribes in the Snake River Adjudication, comprise the largest water right claims (4.0 million acre-feet/annum) in the basin.

Local residents recognize that healthy ecosystems and watersheds are critical to sustaining natural resources and a viable economy, but disagreement has arisen between

public and private sectors as to how this goal can be achieved. The future of the basin and its resources hinges on cooperation among the public land management agencies, private corporations, and the citizenry.

Many locals believe that the area economy, while shifting from strictly timber to timber and recreation-based, has indirectly suffered because of the Endangered Species Act's effects on the industry and legal challenges to the Clearwater Forest Plan's proposed yields. The locals also feel that the shift toward a more recreation-based economy has been hampered by Dworshak Reservoir drawdowns, which have resulted in a reduced usage of the reservoir. According to studies, reduced water levels have adversely impacted recreational opportunities, thereby drastically depressing regional revenues. Consequently, there is genuine concern by the local citizens about ensuring economic viability and sustainability in this time of transition.

New development options regarding water use in the basin were not raised at public meetings. Improvement opportunities focused on options to protect stream water quality. Goals and objectives support continued use of the basin's natural resources for long-term sustainable timber harvest and outdoor recreation. The Board promotes critical fish and wildlife habitat protection, management and monitoring programs to maintain and enhance water quality in the basin, and encourages local land use planning to foster orderly development and preserve the basin's outstanding natural resources.

State law provides that the Comprehensive State Water Plan may not adversely impact existing water rights and uses, timber harvest, stockwater use, or other vested rights. A river reach is designated to protect the waterway from disturbances that are not in the public interest. Vested private property rights outside the riparian area (within 100 linear feet of the mean high water mark) are not impacted by this plan because the designated reaches cannot extend beyond the riparian waterway.

A waterway that has been given a protection designation can impact specific future non-vested activities, such as mining, that occur within the streambed. In addition to designations, the Board can also make recommendations regarding public and private activities that occur within the riparian area and the entire watershed that may directly or indirectly affect the streambed.

Plan Actions

Interest in maintaining the primitive character and aesthetic quality of the basin, preserving valuable fish and wildlife habitat in the basin rivers and streams, and maximizing recreational opportunities, led to protected river designations on basin rivers and streams. Waterways within the North Fork Clearwater Basin designated as a State Natural or Recreational River are listed in Table 1 and shown in Figure 1. Natural River designation prohibits the following activities within the streambed [Idaho Code 1734A-5]:

- construction or expansion of dams or impoundments;
- construction of hydropower projects;
- construction of water diversion works;
- dredge or placer mining;
- alteration of the streambed, and
- mineral or sand and gravel extraction within the streambed.

In designating a Recreational River, the Board determines which of the activities listed above will be prohibited and may specify the terms and conditions under which activities that are not prohibited may go forward [Idaho Code Section 42-1734A-6].